

***Focus: Was the Harlem Renaissance a success for African Americans?***

### **Impact of the Harlem Renaissance**

The Harlem Renaissance was successful in that it brought the Black experience clearly within the corpus of American cultural history. Not only through an explosion of culture, but on a sociological level, the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance is that it redefined how America, and the world, viewed the African-American population. The migration of southern Blacks to the north changed the image of the African-American from rural, undereducated peasants to one of urban, cosmopolitan sophistication. This new identity led to a greater social consciousness, and African-Americans became players on the world stage, expanding intellectual and social contacts internationally.

The progress—both symbolic and real—during this period, became a point of reference from which the African-American community gained a spirit of self-determination that provided a growing sense of both Black urbanity and Black militancy as well as a foundation for the community to build upon for the Civil Rights struggles in the 1950s and 1960s.

The urban setting of rapidly developing Harlem provided a venue for African-Americans of all backgrounds to appreciate the variety of Black life and culture. Through this expression, the Harlem Renaissance encouraged the new appreciation of folk roots and culture. For instance, folk materials and spirituals provided a rich source for the artistic and intellectual imagination and it freed the Blacks from the establishment of past condition. Through sharing in these cultural experiences, a consciousness sprung forth in the form of a united racial identity.

## **Criticism of the movement**

Many critics point out that the Harlem Renaissance could not escape its history and culture in its attempt to create a new one, or sufficiently separate itself from the foundational elements of White, European culture. Often Harlem intellectuals, while proclaiming a new racial consciousness, resorted to mimicry of their White counterparts by adopting their clothing, sophisticated manners and etiquette. This could be seen as a reason by which the artistic and cultural products of the Harlem Renaissance did not overcome the presence of White-American values, and did not reject these values. In this regard, the creation of the "New Negro" as the Harlem intellectuals sought, was considered a success.

The Harlem Renaissance appealed to a mixed audience. The literature appealed to the African-American middle class and to whites. Magazines such as *The Crisis*, a monthly journal of the NAACP, and *Opportunity*, an official publication of the National Urban League, employed Harlem Renaissance writers on their editorial staffs; published poetry and short stories by black writers; and promoted African-American literature through articles, reviews, and annual literary prizes. As important as these literary outlets were, however, the Renaissance relied heavily on white publishing houses and white-owned magazines. In fact, a major accomplishment of the Renaissance was to push open the door to mainstream white periodicals and publishing houses, although the relationship between the Renaissance writers and white publishers and audiences created some controversy. W. E. B. Du Bois did not oppose the relationship between black writers and white publishers, but he was critical of works such as Claude McKay's bestselling novel *Home to Harlem* (1928) for appealing to the "prurient demand[s]" of white readers and publishers for portrayals of black "licentiousness." Langston Hughes spoke for most of the writers and artists when he wrote in his essay *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain* (1926) that black art intend to express themselves freely, no matter what the black public or white public thought.

African American musicians and other performers also played to mixed audiences. Harlem's cabarets and clubs attracted both Harlem residents and white New Yorkers seeking out Harlem nightlife. Harlem's famous Cotton Club, where Duke Ellington performed, carried this to an extreme, by providing black entertainment for exclusively white audiences. Ultimately, the more successful black musicians and entertainers who appealed to a mainstream audience moved their performances downtown.

Certain aspects of the Harlem Renaissance were accepted without question, without debate, and without scrutiny. One of these was the future of the "New Negro." Artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance echoed the American progressivism in its faith in democratic reform, in its belief in art and literature as agents of change, and in its almost uncritical belief in itself and its future. This progressivist worldview rendered Black intellectuals—just as their White counterparts—totally unprepared for the rude shock of the Great Depression, and the Harlem Renaissance ended abruptly because of naive assumptions about the centrality of culture, unrelated to economic and social realities.

## Let America Be America Again

by Langston Hughes

Let America be America again.  
Let it be the dream it used to be.  
Let it be the pioneer on the plain  
Seeking a home where he himself is free.

(America never was America to me.)

Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—  
Let it be that great strong land of love  
Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme  
That any man be crushed by one above.

(It never was America to me.)

O, let my land be a land where Liberty  
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,  
But opportunity is real, and life is free,  
Equality is in the air we breathe.

(There's never been equality for me,  
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")

*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark?  
And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart,  
I am the Negro bearing slavery's scars.  
I am the red man driven from the land,  
I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek—  
And finding only the same old stupid plan  
Of dog eat dog, of mighty crush the weak.

I am the young man, full of strength and hope,  
Tangled in that ancient endless chain  
Of profit, power, gain, of grab the land!  
Of grab the gold! Of grab the ways of satisfying need!  
Of work the men! Of take the pay!  
Of owning everything for one's own greed!

I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil.  
I am the worker sold to the machine.  
I am the Negro, servant to you all.  
I am the people, humble, hungry, mean—  
Hungry yet today despite the dream.  
Beaten yet today—O, Pioneers!  
I am the man who never got ahead,  
The poorest worker bartered through the years.

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  
In the Old World while still a serf of kings,  
Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  
That even yet its mighty daring sings  
In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  
That's made America the land it has become.  
O, I'm the man who sailed those early seas  
In search of what I meant to be my home—  
For I'm the one who left dark Ireland's shore,  
And Poland's plain, and England's grassy lea,

And torn from Black Africa's strand I came  
To build a "homeland of the free."

The free?

Who said the free? Not me?  
Surely not me? The millions on relief today?  
The millions shot down when we strike?  
The millions who have nothing for our pay?  
For all the dreams we've dreamed  
And all the songs we've sung  
And all the hopes we've held  
And all the flags we've hung,  
The millions who have nothing for our pay—  
Except the dream that's almost dead today.

O, let America be America again—  
The land that never has been yet—  
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.  
The land that's mine—the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME—  
Who made America,  
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

Sure, call me any ugly name you choose—  
The steel of freedom does not stain.  
From those who live like leeches on the people's lives,  
We must take back our land again,  
America!

O, yes,  
I say it plain,  
America never was America to me,  
And yet I swear this oath—  
America will be!

Out of the rack and ruin of our gangster death,  
The rape and rot of graft, and stealth, and lies,  
We, the people, must redeem  
The land, the mines, the plants, the rivers.  
The mountains and the endless plain—  
All, all the stretch of these great green states—  
And make America again!

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# **I, Too, Sing America**

by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.

They send me to eat in the kitchen

When company comes,

But I laugh,

And eat well,

And grow strong.

Tomorrow,

I'll be at the table

When company comes.

Nobody'll dare

Say to me,

"Eat in the kitchen,"

Then.

Besides,

They'll see how beautiful I am

And be ashamed--

I, too, am America.

themselves from their homes in the South and moved north to the big cities in search of jobs. By the end of the decade, 5.2 million of the nation's 12 million African Americans—over 40 percent—lived in cities. Zora Neale Hurston documented the departure of some of these African Americans.

### A PERSONAL VOICE ZORA NEALE HURSTON

"Some said goodbye cheerfully . . . others fearfully, with terrors of unknown dangers in their mouths . . . others in their eagerness for distance said nothing. The daybreak found them gone. The wind said North."

—quoted in *Sorrow's Kitchen: The Life and Folklore of Zora Neale Hurston*

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Effects

A How did the influx of African Americans change Northern cities?

However, Northern cities in general had not welcomed the massive influx of African Americans. Tensions had escalated in the years prior to 1920, culminating, in the summer of 1919, in approximately 25 urban race riots. A

**AFRICAN-AMERICAN GOALS** Founded in 1909, The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) urged African Americans to protest racial violence. W. E. B. Du Bois, a founding member of the NAACP, led a parade of 10,000 African-American men in New York to protest such violence. Du Bois also used the NAACP's magazine, *The Crisis*, as a platform for leading a struggle for civil rights.

Under the leadership of **James Weldon Johnson**—poet, lawyer, and NAACP executive secretary—the organization fought for legislation to protect African-American rights. It made antilynching laws one of its main priorities. In 1919, three antilynching bills were introduced in Congress, although none was passed. The NAACP continued its campaign through antilynching organizations that had been established in 1892 by Ida B. Wells. Gradually, the number of lynchings dropped. The NAACP represented the new, more militant voice of African Americans.

**MARCUS GARVEY AND THE UNIA** Although many African Americans found their voice in the NAACP, they still faced daily threats and discrimination. **Marcus Garvey**, an immigrant from Jamaica, believed that African Americans should build a separate society. His different, more radical message of black pride aroused the hopes of many.

In 1914, Garvey founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). In 1918, he moved the UNIA to New York City and opened offices in urban ghettos in order to recruit followers. By the mid-1920s, Garvey claimed he had a million followers. He appealed to African Americans with a combination of spellbinding oratory, mass meetings, parades, and a message of pride.

#### Vocabulary

**oratory:** the art of public speaking

### A PERSONAL VOICE MARCUS GARVEY

"In view of the fact that the black man of Africa has contributed as much to the world as the white man of Europe, and the brown man and yellow man of Asia, we of the Universal Negro Improvement Association demand that the white, yellow, and brown races give to the black man his place in the civilization of the world. We ask for nothing more than the rights of 400 million Negroes."

—speech at Liberty Hall, New York City, 1922

### KEY PLAYER

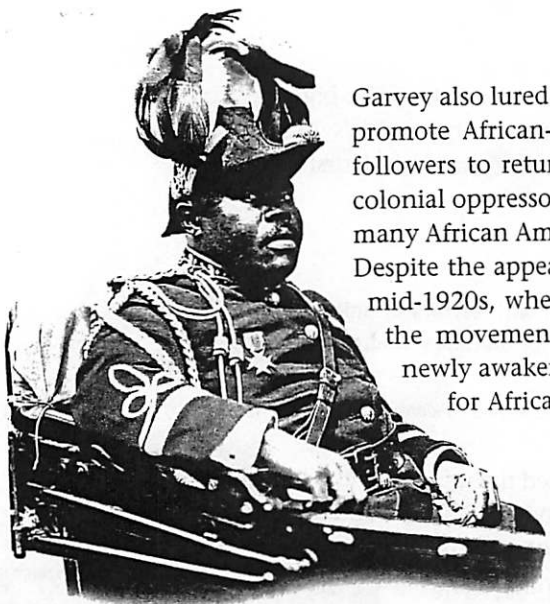


**JAMES WELDON JOHNSON**  
1871–1938

James Weldon Johnson worked as a school principal, newspaper editor, and lawyer in Florida. In 1900, he wrote the lyrics for "Lift Every Voice and Sing," the song that became known as the black national anthem. The first stanza begins as follows:

"Lift every voice and sing  
Till earth and heaven ring,  
Ring with the harmonies of  
Liberty;  
Let our rejoicing rise  
High as the listening skies,  
Let it resound loud as the  
rolling sea."

In the 1920s, Johnson straddled the worlds of politics and art. He served as executive secretary of the NAACP, spearheading the fight against lynching. In addition, he wrote well-known works, such as *God's Trombones*, a series of sermon-like poems, and *Black Manhattan*, a look at black cultural life in New York during the Roaring Twenties.



▲ Marcus Garvey designed this uniform of purple and gold, complete with feathered hat, for his role as "Provisional President of Africa."

Garvey also lured followers with practical plans, especially his program to promote African-American businesses. Further, Garvey encouraged his followers to return to Africa, help native people there throw off white colonial oppressors, and build a mighty nation. His idea struck a chord in many African Americans, as well as in blacks in the Caribbean and Africa. Despite the appeal of Garvey's movement, support for it declined in the mid-1920s, when he was convicted of mail fraud and jailed. Although the movement dwindled, Garvey left behind a powerful legacy of newly awakened black pride, economic independence, and reverence for Africa. **B**

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Summarizing

**B** What approach to race relations did Marcus Garvey promote?

## The Harlem Renaissance Flowers in New York

Many African Americans who migrated north moved to Harlem, a neighborhood on the Upper West Side of New York's Manhattan Island. In the 1920s, Harlem became the world's largest black urban community, with residents from the South, the West Indies, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Haiti. James Weldon Johnson described Harlem as the capital of black America.

### A PERSONAL VOICE JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

"Harlem is not merely a Negro colony or community, it is a city within a city, the greatest Negro city in the world. It is not a slum or a fringe, it is located in the heart of Manhattan and occupies one of the most beautiful . . . sections of the city. . . . It has its own churches, social and civic centers, shops, theaters, and other places of amusement. And it contains more Negroes to the square mile than any other spot on earth."

—"Harlem: The Culture Capital"

Like many other urban neighborhoods, Harlem suffered from overcrowding, unemployment, and poverty. But its problems in the 1920s were eclipsed by a flowering of creativity called the **Harlem Renaissance**, a literary and artistic movement celebrating African-American culture.

**AFRICAN-AMERICAN WRITERS** Above all, the Harlem Renaissance was a literary movement led by well-educated, middle-class African Americans who expressed a new pride in the African-American experience. They celebrated their heritage and wrote with defiance and poignancy about the trials of being black in a white world. W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson helped these young talents along, as did the Harvard-educated former Rhodes scholar Alain Locke. In 1925, Locke published *The New Negro*, a landmark collection of literary works by many promising young African-American writers.

**Claude McKay**, a novelist, poet, and Jamaican immigrant, was a major figure whose militant verses urged African Americans to resist prejudice and discrimination. His poems also expressed the pain of life in the black ghettos and the strain of being black in a world dominated by whites. Another gifted writer of the time was Jean Toomer. His experimental book *Cane*—a mix of poems and sketches about blacks in the North and the South—was among the first full-length literary publications of the Harlem Renaissance.

Missouri-born **Langston Hughes** was the movement's best-known poet. Many of Hughes's 1920s poems described the difficult lives of working-class African Americans. Some of his poems moved to the tempo of jazz and the blues. (See Literature in the Jazz Age on page 664.)